

# Some Experiences of Lord Syfret.

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## THE BEAUTIFUL MRS. TOMPKINS.

ILLUSTRATED BY R. SAVAGE.

### CHAPTER I.

*The following has been communicated to me by a medical woman of my acquaintance. It explains a mystery at the time, much discussed in a certain circle. To many it remains to this day a mystery.*

"SHE'S just pining away before my very eyes," Mr. Tompkins said. Mr. Tompkins was a person small of physique but great in the city, who had summioted me—the only medical woman in the neighbourhood, to prescribe for his wife. His pre-eminence in things financial was proclaimed, had the fact needed insistence, by the magnificence of his possessions.

The road to his house had taken me through miles of beautiful parkland, which was but a fraction of the Tompkins estate, and was set with the rarest shrubs and trees that skill and gold could induce to grow there. The house was a marble mansion, each room a triumph of art. Yet with all his prosperity Tompkins was able to ward from his lovely young wife neither sickness, nor childlessness, nor any other ill save hunger and cold and the blessing of drudgery to which flesh is heir.

No woman, out of a Zenana could afford to wear such gorgeous gowns, no well-living reputably wedded woman boasted such jewels. Nor had any a more charmingly appointed house, or handsomer horses and carriages, to speed her through life. If she had wished, she might even have wheeled on a silver sybelle. Yet, as the poor little fellow deplored, she was pinig away before his eyes.

She was a beautiful creature. Too ethereal for a goddess—our notions of goddesses have descended to us from an age of stone—she was like some pictured seraph. But in her face were lines of human yearning such as seraphs—so we

are taught to believe—are never guilty of, and her eyes suggested weariness and tears. She sat in her pink boudoir that morning a dainty, iridescence in a silken tea-gown bedecked with ostrich-feathers and beign, with silver clasps. Her fingers flashed with rings of diamond, amethyst and pearl, and her great knot of nut-brown hair was loosely caught back on her neck by a silver dagger, diamond-set. Her small silk-stockinged feet nestled in satin slippers, and frills of the filniest lace peeped out at the hem of her gown. If money were at all another name for happiness, then would the chalice of Mrs. Tompkins' bliss have been full indeed, but happiness walks as frequently bare-footed as it does in buckled-shoes.

Mrs. Tompkins was manifestly ill. Health never showed a skin so milky or such dustry eyes, nor have hands of her translucency a hold on life. "I have taken her abroad," Tompkins said, "but she only gets worse. She is crying all the while for home."

He crossed the dainty room, every stick and stitch of whose daintiness belonged to him, as did the white-clad woman in its midst. He took one of her delicate hands in his. It shivered for a moment, then lay passive on his short stout palm. He held it wistfully, his mean features working with a pathos that would have dignified a visage less vulgar. But Tompkins was exceptionally ordinary. "There's a hand for a Christian," he protested, in his common way. "I'm downright ashamed of it. Looks as if I starved her."



WE ARE NOT A LONG-LIVED FAMILY.

Mrs. Tompkins laughed faintly and whose word was his bond, whose name in the city was safe as the Bank of England.

Nature had certainly been hard on him. Through all her transparent skin, his dainty wife flushed with repudiation at his coming. There was not a fibre in her but rebelled against him. She shuddered under his touch. Even the lustrous velvet pupils of her eyes shrank upon him. Yet she smiled and suffered his caresses, as if recognising the claims of his worth and affection, and the fact that she belonged to him. When he soon left us she drew a deep breath of

relief. Her whole expression changed. "I am not very strong," she said, "but there is really nothing wrong with me. My husband would take me away, and I am not happy except at home."

Her eye met mine just then. A sudden tide of sensitive blood rushed over her face and throat, her lids were down-cast with a curious consciousness. "I have never been strong," she continued, striving for composure. "We are not a long-lived family."

I went into her ease; but could find no cause for her weakness and wasting.

"Does the mind never prey on the body?" she asked, impatient of my questions.

"Certainly," I answered, "but the fact of some physical failure just as frequently preys on the mind, and cause and effect get jumbled. Many a girl attributes to a sentimental cause the depression that is merely the outcome of dyspepsia."

"I do not know what dyspepsia means," she said, "but then I have never any appetite."

"You have not enough to do."

## CHAPTER II.

I could hear of no Leander. A doctor is made the recipient of much gossip, for in sickly persons wax confidential both as regards their own and their neighbours' affairs. But the beautiful Mrs. Tompkins, as she was known throughout all the county, had shown no preference, had in fact for that very reason given dire offence among the train of cavaliers to be found at the charming heels of any young and attractive woman whose widowhood obviates the matrimonial risks besetting single blessings. Her indifference to the other sex was so pronounced that it was generally conceded there must be somebody at a distance, or even somebody dead, whom she had met and loved before she married Tompkins. Nobody knew anything definite. They only knew that here was a young and lovely woman who plainly did not love her husband (a circumstance not regarded as unusual or anybody else in view, and so they wondered who and where was the man she did love. They ignored the significant fact that many a young and lovely

"Do you know I was last week at four balls, two dinners, three hunt breakfasts and a wedding; and I had a good-sized house-party all the time?"

"Then you have too much to do."

She shook her head. "When my time is occupied, I do not brood."

"What in the name of wonder have you to brood over? If you were to see the conditions under which some of my patients live, you would learn what real trouble is."

"I daresay I would change with some of them," she said slowly, "for some of them have what I have not."

"One cannot have everything," was my sententious comment.

"Ah! but there are things and things," she answered with a quiver of her lovely lips.

With Tompkins in my mind, her meaning was evident enough.

Now in the name of all the gods who order domesticity, I pondered, let no Leander fall in Mrs. Tompkins' way. If, indeed, I added, remembering her sudden-flush and consciousness, Leander be not already in the tide.

overhanging eyes proclaimed to be anger. He walked about the handsome room, clutching and unclenching his fists.

"I overheard something as I left the dining-room," he began stifling in his voice a rage that would have roared. Then he lost control. "If there's any truth in it I swear before God I'll kill him."

delicacy and melancholy have served for an excuse for idle tongues. You know as well as I do that there is not the least foundation for such a suspicion."

"I know! Great Heavens, what does any man know where a woman is concerned?" he raged.

"You are not just. I believe no one more honourable-minded lives."



THE GLEAM OF SOMETHING WHITE

He grasped my hand and wrung it. For a moment he was almost good-looking. "Thank you for that," he said, "thank you for it. I've always found her so. But what did Somers mean? He spoke as if he knew something."

"He knows nothing more, I am confident, than that she once very properly snubbed him. I have heard the whole thing threshed out. The worst they can say is that she must be pining for somebody because she has that touch of melancholy you know in her."

Perspiration beaded his forehead, though all round the house the snow lay thick and the library fire had gone out.

"You know there's no truth in it," I insisted.

He turned on me suspiciously. "You have heard it then."

"I have heard some silly gossip. Her

"Yes, but may not be so? Why is she melancholy?"

"Temperament."

"Ah, you say so? But she is certainly melancholy—and ill."

His voice fell as though he feared to give substance to the truth by speaking it.

"God knows I'm not the sort of man for any woman to be in love with," he said presently. "I'm only a money-grabbing machine. I've been able to buy myself one of the loveliest creatures God ever made, but I can't make her care for me any more than she cares for one of the footmen." He laughed bitterly. "When I was a poor devil of a clerk I could spend hours in picture-galleries and fields. Now I have a picture-gallery and a park of my own it bores me to walk through them. I've spent my life in getting things I was all

the while losing the power to enjoy as I see ninety-five per cent of my neighbours doing. While I've been grubbing money to set my wife in luxury I've been losing all that might have made her care for me. We haven't a taste in common. She is—well, you know what she is: I—well, you can see what I am."

The unfortunate man was unburdening himself to himself rather than to me, and I felt in the embarrassing position of one who overhears what is not meant for him. The contempt with which he reviewed his own shortcomings—and I could not deny that he had painted a faithful if a cruel portrait—was of a kind we sometimes indulge against ourselves in solitude, but rarely in public.

"If I ever have any sons," he wound up, "I'll stop the breed of money machines. I'll put them to the plough and make men of them."

### CHAPTER III.

It was close upon twelve and I was on the point of retiring when some weeks later Mr. Tompkins thundered upon my door. Hearing him in the hall I went out. "Can you come at once?" he asked. "She is ill."

"What is the matter?"

"I charged her with it—and it's true," he broke out furiously.

"Did she admit anything?"

"Do women ever tell the truth? I caught her kissing his portrait. She wears a rose over her heart. And to think," he broke out passionately, "to think of the thousands of roses I have given her and she has thrown aside."

"A thing belonging to her girhood," he hazarded, "withered and shrivelled almost beyond recognition."

"Not three days old, I'll swear," he said sardonically.

I found her in her white room, an exhausted, weary woman. Her appearance was alarming. I had not seen her for some weeks and, during that interval, she had altered sadly for the worse. She did not notice my approach. She lay on a couch, with closed eyes. In the curled fingers of one wasted hand was a little heap of rose-petals—rose-petals, obviously, as her husband had said, "not three days old."

He turned on his heel and went out. I

While we were getting her to bed a photograph slipped from her dress and fell on the floor, face down. In picking it up the maid half turned it over. I caught a glimpse of a noble head. The photograph was recent, for the name on the back was that of a photographer who had not long come into the neighbourhood. Poor Mr. Tompkins! I reflected, contrasting his appearance with that of this classic rival. And poor Mrs. Tompkins! I reflected, considering her white and wasted arms and the pathetic shrinking of her beautiful breast. What a tragedy civilization had made of nature. Every curve in her dainty womanhood called out for love: her seeking eyes, her tender hands, the unsbed kisses of her mouth. Every nerve in her strung to the tension of the noble, cried for a hero. Society and her mother had given her Mr. Tompkins.

Possibly, weighed in the balance of citizenship, the scale would speak in Tompkins' rather than in Leander's favour, but the Tompkins virtues were essentially of the counting-house order and no woman has ever been found to love a man, because he happened to be gifted with an exceptional head for figures, though many a woman has been found to marry one for no more valid reason!

### CHAPTER IV.

DESPITE the evidence of the rose and portrait, the object of Mrs. Tompkins' interest remained concealed. All her husband's efforts, and though he maintained a sullen silence on the subject I knew he was moving heaven and earth to trace his rival, proved abortive. The post-bag held no letter either in her or the unknown's hand. She preserved the same indifference to every man who

his staff of servants might well have relieved him.

He was jealous that anybody but himself should do the least thing for her. But all that the poor man did out of the fonderest and finest in his nature; his mean appearance and ill-manner of doing spoilt. Though I saw and realised his merits I could not blind myself to the fact that he had not one quality to rouse



I'LL FIND HIM YET

visited the house. And she died by tactics.

During this period Tompkins behaved extraordinarily well. I was in constant attendance, and, I never knew him to speak a word of complaint or rebuke. He was tender and kind to a degree pathetic to one who knew the circumstances. At the end of a long day in the city, and his days there were long and onerous, he would be ready—eager if need were—to sit up with her at night, to ride any distance for some trifles she desired, or to fulfil any other duty whereof

a woman's love. For nature making for physical perfectness gives physical perfectness her magic. And, as I have said, poor Tompkins was so very ordinary.

Once as he arranged her pillows, during the illness that followed, I saw her turn and kiss his clumsy fingers wistfully. There was in her eyes a look of pain as though she would gratefully have loved him if she could. But nature had decreed against him—cruelly if you will—but nature did not want any of Mr. Tompkins in her perfect man.

At the touch of her lips, an incoherent

moan, like the cry of a hurt animal, broke from him. He flung himself down by her bed, and buried his face in its satin and lace. The very abandon of his pain and passion would in another man have been convincing and coercive, but the intensity of the impulse only saved the unfortunate Tompkins from grotesqueness. The physical degeneracy consequent on his life and heredity masked the natural man. Romeo, for all his sentiment and ardour, could not move you vulgarly disguised.

Mrs. Tompkins was on a fair road to recovery when I found her one morning with high fever, a pulse that proclaimed the blood-tide dashing through its channels with devastating force, blazing eyes that seemed to scorch great circling shadows round them. "What is the meaning of this?" I questioned of her maid:

Her mistress's burning eyes flashed her an entreaty. But the girl was faithfully obdurate. "I told her I must tell you," she replied, "because she's just killing herself. She was out last night again, ma'am."

"Out! Out with the thermometer, near freezing point! Out 'in' all that rain!"

"She was in the quadrangle, ma'am. She's there for hours together. And it's enough to give anybody their death, let alone her being so delicate. I said I'd tell the doctor, ma'am. It wasn't anything but my duty," she excused herself.

Mrs. Tompkins' gaze met mine. Her face became suddenly suffused with that same blush and shame I had seen before. She turned her looks away. "So there is a Leander, after all," I concluded, and I confess my sympathies at that moment were with Tompkins.

When she was better I warned her. "You must give up those visits to the quadrangle, my dear. The damp there endangers your life." She glanced at me beseemingly. Her hand stole up with a gesture of secrecy to something at her breast.

"Your husband is a kind but a jealous man," I went on, "and if he were to find anybody you care about, there would be sad trouble."

She gave a little choking sob, and turned her face away. "There is nobody at all," she faltered.

I strolled one day into the quadrangle. It was, as Bradley had said, a dismal place

enough, and certainly the last place in the world for my delicate patient. It was shut-in-tomb-like by a wall of yews. It was marble paved, and the pavement glistened dank and mossy. At one end a sun-dial carven in stone showed the hour in shadow; at the other, a statue of young Antinous, begirt from shoulder to knee with a leopard-skin, stood poised holding a javelin lightly in one hand. He was set high on a mound of grass, and showed supple and beautiful against the hedge of yews. At the foot of the bank I found a fading rose.

I was turning aside with a cynical thought—for the rose had not dropped from the skies—when my attention was caught by the gleam of something white protruding from between the statue's shapely shoulder and his leopard skin. It was a note with the superscription "To my Dearest," in Mrs. Tompkins' failing hand. I felt myself at liberty to pocket it lest somebody less scrupulous should do so. It was stained and wet, having apparently lain in its hiding-place some days.

I restored it to her next morning. "I found it in the quadrangle," I said.

Her white face flushed, and the hand she held for it shook till the paper rustled. She thanked me below her breath and with an air of shame. She leaned up presently as though she had it in her mind to speak, but she thought better of it and sank back on her pillows with a sigh.

Meanwhile where was Leander hiding? The world outside Mrs. Tompkins' gates had come to the conclusion that Leander was a fiction, just as the facts of his hitherto doubted existence were forcing themselves irresistibly on the notice of her own house.

Tompkins became a changed man. He was moody and absent. People wondered why he had taken to spending his Sunday's and Saturday afternoons in pistol-practice. Two or three youths not yet of an age to realise that which is due to the millionaire, hazarded the witticism that Tompkins projected inviting the Prince of Wales or the German Emperor to shoot over his coverts the following season, and being city-bred imagined partridges and pheasants to be brought down with revolver and bullets.

But if they had met the man as I have met him, his sallow face ashen, his mouth one grim line, his eyes fixed wildly as in some lonely corner of his park, he



"PRONE AT THE STATUE'S FEET"

aimed for the heart of an imagined adversary, they would have held their peace. He prowled about at night and came home at odd seasons. Of all of which assiduities on his part, I believe Mrs. Tompkins was wholly unsuspicuous. She said only she thought it must be better for Robert's health that he should not be continually in that horrid city.

But that day when I found him putting bullets into the bark of a cherished catalpa, he had avowed himself. "By God!" he had said, the sweat standing thick on his forehead. "I'll find him yet."

"You do yourself and her a cruel injustice," I had answered and passed on. For though I could not deny that there was something I did not think what he thought.

And then the whole pitiful thing came out. It was just upon midnight when Bradley precipitated herself into my room. "Please, ma'am, come," she panted, "come or she'll get her death. I did all I could, but she would go out."

The girl had commanded or cajoled a dog-cart out of the stables and I drove back post-haste with her. Arrived we made a feint of entering by a side door, leaving the groom in the drive. "This way," she whispered, "it's a short cut to the quadrangle. And whatever will the master say?"

The moon was making of the world a giant monotone. We could see our way clearly, though at intervals we were plunged in the profoundest shade. Not a sound stirred, beyond the crunching of the gravel under our feet and the brush and snap of twigs as we pushed past.

The quadrangle was a flood of light. In that white flood like a drowned thing Mrs. Tompkins lay—pronate the statue's feet. She wore but a thin robe, a robe designed for warm luxurious rooms, and she lay with her fragile limbs in the wet frost-crissing grass.

One wasted arm was flung about the marble feet. From time to time she kissed them. "When I am dead, dear," she whispered as though someone had been there, "shall I see you? Are you in the world where I am going?"

I anathematised him for a selfish brute, whosoever he might be. But I doubted that he had been there that evening. He would scarcely have left her in such plight. We got her away. She was weak and light. It was easy to loose her clinging hands. As we bore her

upstairs, treading softly, for scandal has sensitive ears, we met Tompkins coming down. His eyes were bloodshot. He was dressed for walking; he held a revolver in one hand.

At sight of us he started. "Good Heavens, what is it? Is she hurt?" "Mistress was delirious, sir, and wandered in her sleep," the faithful Bradley said.

"You are a liar," he thundered, "and if I find you've been deceiving me, you shall go before morning."

Bradley tossed her head and muttered. But she dared not speak.

Mrs. Tompkins died that night. She regained consciousness for that moment only in which she lost it for ever. Her face became illuminated, her soul leapt out through her eyes. "Now I am coming," she cried, and died.

Perhaps, after all, I reflected, the man is dead and she was but keeping a memory green.

But the secret did not die with her.

Two mornings later Tompkins strolled into my room. In his hand was an envelope. He laid it before me. On it was written, in his wife's hand, the tremulous hand of her latter days:

*Dear Robert, it is something I have loved, something that has been the most to me in my short life. Put it on my heart, dear, and bury it with me. Oh, I shall sleep so quietly.*

"I would not open it without a witness," he said, taking up the envelope again.

"You should not open it at all."

He laughed, a short, harsh laugh. His bloodshot eyes seemed starting from his head. "Then I might pass him in the street, or even sit at meat with him," he said.

He tore it open. A photograph fell out. I recognised it in a moment. He scanned it closely, impressing the features on his memory, I thought. For some minutes his fury blinded him. Then his face limned the change from rage, jealousy, revenge, to absolute bewilderment. He flung it down and burst into a fit of baffled laughter. "What does it mean?" he gasped.

I knew the classic head at a glance. I remembered how a former glimpse of it had set me pitting it against Tompkins. But I was not prepared for that which turned out. The portrait was a portrait

of the marble Antinous of the quadrangle.

It was faded and worn with the clinging and moisture of a thousand kisses. It was moulded and curved by the warmth of her bosom and cheek. There were circles where tears had rained from her eyes had fallen on it. About it clung tenderly and like a long caress a strand of her beautiful hair. Out of its envelope

a shower of sad-scented rose-petals dropped, tied to it by a ribbon was a knot of love-notes—love-notes bearing that superscription "To my Dearest."

"What does it mean?" he whispered, his face as white in the dawning of the mystery as hers at home.

"It means nothing, my friend," I said as well as I was able. "Nothing but another woman's broken heart!"

### THE WIDOWED HEART

I sit in the flickering firelight,  
Soft shadow's round me fall;  
The silence is strangely tender  
That fills my hearth and hall;  
It seems like a winged spirit  
Soothing my heart of pain,  
Then I start and almost fancy  
I hear thy voice again.  
The quiet dark steals o'er the land,  
The wind is half a moan,  
You sleep on the lonely hill-side,  
And I am here alone.  
I leave my windows unshuttered,  
You always loved the light,  
How can I shut in this brightness  
Wher you are in the night?  
With only the storm-toss'd billows  
Singing thy requiem hymn,  
Whilst silent stars from their awful height  
Watch when the light grows dim.  
You have slipped from my fond embrace,  
Who found earth's dearest bles,  
In these ready arms to shelter  
With love and tender kiss,  
You have passed beyond earth's voices,  
Beyond the hand that clings,  
If I called you would not answer,  
Nor list to earthly things.  
O! could I but rise and follow  
To yon still, mystic shore,  
For alas! my arms are empty—  
Empty for evermore.

S. LOUIE ROWE